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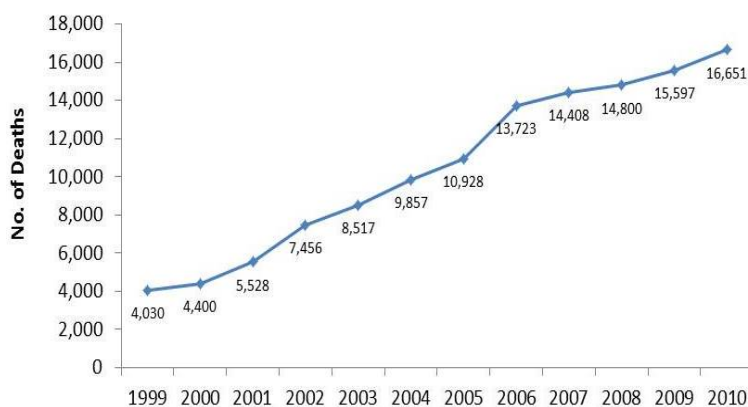
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HHS leaders call for expanded use of medications to combat opioid overdose epidemic
New England Journal of Medicine commentary describes that vital medications are currently underutilized in addiction treatment services and discusses ongoing efforts by major public health agencies to encourage their use

A national response to the epidemic of prescription opioid overdose deaths was outlined yesterday in the *New England Journal of Medicine* by leaders of agencies in the U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services. The commentary calls upon health care providers to expand their use of medications to treat opioid addiction and reduce overdose deaths, and describes a number of misperceptions that have limited access to

these potentially life-saving medications. The commentary also discusses how medications can be used in combination with behavior therapies to help drug users recover and remain drug-free, and use of data-driven tracking to monitor program progress.



Number of prescription opioid related deaths 1999-2010
Source: [CDC WONDER](#)

The commentary was authored by leaders of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) within the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS).

“When prescribed and monitored properly, medications such as methadone, buprenorphine, or naltrexone are safe and cost-effective components of opioid addiction treatment,” said lead author and NIDA director Nora D. Volkow, M.D. “These medications can improve lives and reduce the risk of overdose, yet medication-assisted therapies are markedly underutilized.”

Research has led to several medications that can be used to help treat opioid addiction, including methadone, usually administered in clinics; buprenorphine, which can be given by [qualifying doctors](#); and naltrexone, now available in a once-a-month injectable, long-acting form. The authors stress the value of these medications and describe reasons why treatment services have been slow to utilize them. The reasons include inadequate provider education and misunderstandings about addiction medications by the public, health care providers, insurers, and patients. For example, one common, long-held misperception is that medication-assisted

therapies merely replace one addiction for another – an attitude that is not backed by the science. The authors also discuss the importance of naloxone, a potentially life-saving medication that blocks the effects of opioids as a person first shows symptoms of an overdose.

The article describes how HHS agencies are collaborating with public and private stakeholders to expand access to and improve utilization of medication-assisted therapies, in tandem with other targeted approaches to reducing opioid overdoses. For example, NIDA is funding research to improve access to medication-assisted therapies, develop new medications for opioid addiction, and expand access to naloxone by exploring more user-friendly delivery systems (for example, nasal sprays). CDC is working with states to implement comprehensive strategies for overdose prevention that include medication-assisted therapies, as well as enhanced surveillance of prescriptions and clinical practices. CDC is also establishing statewide norms to provide better tools for the medical community in making prescription decisions.

“Prescription drug overdoses in the United States are skyrocketing. The good news is we can prevent this problem by stopping the source and treating the troubled,” said co-author and CDC director Tom Frieden, M.D., M.P.H. “It is critical that states use effective prescription drug tracking programs so we can improve prescribing practices and help get those who are abusing drugs into treatment.”

Charged with providing access to treatment programs, SAMHSA is encouraging medication-assisted therapy through the Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant as well as regulatory oversight of medications used to treat opioid addiction. SAMHSA has also developed an [Opioid Overdose Toolkit](#) to educate first responders in the use of naloxone to prevent overdose deaths. The toolkit includes easy-to-understand information about recognizing and responding appropriately to overdose, specific drug-use behaviors to avoid, and the role of naloxone in preventing fatal overdose.

“SAMHSA’s Opioid Overdose Toolkit is the first federal resource to provide safety and prevention information for those at risk for overdose and for their loved ones,” said co-author and SAMHSA Administrator Pamela S. Hyde, J.D. “It also gives local governments the information they need to develop policies and practices to help prevent and respond appropriately to opioid-related overdose.”

CMS is working to enhance access to medication-assisted therapies through a more comprehensive benefit design, as well as a more robust application of the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act.

“Appropriate access to medication-assisted therapies under Medicaid is a key piece of the strategy to address the rising rate of death from overdoses of prescription opioids,” said co-author Stephen Cha, M.D., M.H.S., chief medical officer for the Center for Medicaid and CHIP [Children’s Health Insurance Program] Services at CMS. “CMS is collaborating closely with partners across the country, inside and outside government, to improve care to address this widespread problem.”

However, the authors point out that success of these strategies requires engagement and participation of the medical community.

The growing availability of prescription opioids has increased risks for people undergoing treatment for pain and created an environment and marketplace of diversion, where people who are not seeking these medications for medical reasons abuse and sell the drugs because they can produce a high.

More than 16,000 people die every year in this country from prescription opioid overdoses, more than heroin and cocaine combined. According to SAMHSA's [2012 National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#), almost 2.1 million people in the United States were dependent upon or abusing opioid pain relievers. More information on prescription opioid abuse can be found at: www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/prescription-drugs.

Reference: Medication-Assisted Therapies — Tackling the Opioid-Overdose Epidemic. Nora D. Volkow, M.D. (NIDA), Thomas R. Frieden, M.D., M.P.E. (CDC), Pamela S. Hyde, J.D. (SAMHSA), and Stephen Cha, M.D., M.H.S. (CMS). The New England Journal of Medicine, April 23, 2014: www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1402780.

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